Archived at the Flinders Academic Commons
http://dspace.flinders.edu.au/dspace/
This is the author’s radio script of this article.

A few pages into J.M. Coetzee’ new book Summertime I detected in myself a modicum of disappointment. The book begins with what purport to be the notebooks of a South African living with his father in Cape Town in the 1970s, a ‘he’ who is apparently continuous with the subject of Coetzee’s previous memoirs – as indeed the reader is led to expect by the blurb on the front flap where this book is described as completing ‘the majestic trilogy of fictionalised memoir begun with Boyhood and Youth’.

The notebook extracts begin with the description of an atrocity visited upon a South African family in Botswana, which the writer attributes to the South African nationalist government. He attempts to share his outrage with his father but can elicit no response from him stronger than a shrug:

His father can find no form of words spacious enough to cover his distaste for, on the one hand, thugs who slaughter defenceless women and children and, on the other, terrorists who wage war from havens across the border. He resolves the problem by immersing himself in the cricket scores. As a response to a moral dilemma it is feeble; yet is his own response – fits of rage and despair – any better? (4-5)

I wondered, trying not to entertain a frisson of schadenfreud, whether Coetzee had finally run out of creative energy. This seemed clichéd, a tired parody of his earlier work.

But it wasn’t long before I was rudely jolted out of my ennui. The notebook extracts finish after about 15 pages and a new section begins, titled, enigmatically, ‘Julia’. It soon becomes clear that Coetzee is narrating this so-called memoir at several removes. The notebook extracts immediately reappear as part of a biographer’s material, provided as an aide-memoir to an interview subject. This is a woman who, resentful of her husband’s suspected unfaithfulness, had a somewhat desultory affair with John in the early 1970s. This is intriguing: she describes John as he appeared to her when she first met him in 1972:

In appearance he was not what most people would call attractive. He was scrawny, he had a beard, he wore horn-rimmed glasses and sandals. … There was an air of seediness about him too, an air of failure. (21)

But the first real shock comes on page 37, when Julia says, ‘How explicit do I need to be? Since he is dead, it can make no difference to him, any indiscreetness on my part.’ This is not only autobiography at several removes, but posthumous autobiography at that! The biographer, known only as ‘Mr Vincent’, never met Coetzee.

Next we hear from Margot, the cousin Coetzee writes about in Boyhood (there called Agnes). She recounts how they met as adults on a visit to the family farm. Despite their shared childhood memories, she finds him ‘prickly, opinionated, incompetent, [and] ridiculous’ (113). But it gets worse. Adriana, a Brazilian immigrant whose teenage daughter was taught English by Coetzee, clearly detests him. She suspects him of sexual designs on her daughter, and when, with unnerving doggedness, he turns his amorous attentions upon her, she rejects him with fierce Latin disdain. She asks the interviewer: ‘How could this man of yours be a great man when he was not human? … I tell you, I shiver with cold when I think of, you know, intimacy with a man like that’ (199).
The last two interviews are with university colleagues. Martin doesn’t have a lot to say: ‘John was a perfectly adequate academic … but not a notable teacher’ (212). He takes the interviewer to task for trying to read themes in the novels back into the writer’s biography, and comments, ‘it seems to me strange to be doing the biography of a writer while ignoring his writing’ (218). Sophie, a French colleague with whom he had an affair, damns with faint praise: ‘In general I would say that his work lacks ambition. … Too cool, too neat, I would say. Too easy. Too lacking in passion. That’s all.’ (242)

Bracketing the end of the book is another set of notebook extracts, again dealing with his father, their difficult relationship, founded on guilt and pity, and his father’s lapse into what seems to be a final illness.

*Summertime*, then, having totally confounded my initial weary superiority, unlike most memoirs provides few even remotely reliable facts and poses more questions than it even begins to answer. Why is so much of this book obsessively about sex, rather than the creative life of this major novelist? Why does he deliberately avoid explaining the circumstances surrounding his departure from the United States for South Africa in 1972 – there is speculation about this but nobody really knows. Coetzee himself married in 1963 and had two children, but in *Summertime* John is single and nobody has heard about this family. And how, when he has ostensibly constructed the narrative to be so distanced from his own apparent point of view, does it come to seem so extraordinarily solipsistic and self-lacerating?

On the first reading, I was so astonished by this book that the pages turned quickly, in rather a blur. The second time I took it slower and was able to see more of the detail, and appreciate the humour – stern, Beckettian jokes, mostly directed against himself. Perhaps the very title is a joke – only someone from a very hot country could describe this arid existence as ‘summertime’. This is far from the sunny memoir the uninitiated might expect. But Coetzee’s admirers will not be surprised by being once again challenged, confounded and rewarded by another uncomfortable and unexpected reading experience.